DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 699 UD 029 723

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TITLE Language and Race: Barriers to Communicating a Vision.
INSTITUTION Saint Paul Foundation, St. Paul, MN.
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 5p.; For related documents, see UD 029 722-724. A publication of the Supporting Diversity in Schools Program.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Problems; Cultural Differences; Cultural Pluralism; Economically Disadvantaged; Educationally Disadvantaged; Elementary Education; *Ethnic Groups; *Human Relations; Intercultural Communication; Minority Groups; *Racial Integration; *School Community Programs; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Diversity (Groups); Diversity (Student); Minnesota; Saint Paul Public Schools MN; Supporting Diversity in Schools MN

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problems faced by Minnesota's Supporting Diversity in Schools organization in communicating their goal of making schools responsive to students of differing ethnic backgrounds. It was found that using terms such as "multicultural curriculum" and "isolation of schools and communities of color from one another," brought out different meanings. While some saw it as equal education with less ethnic bias, others saw it as the creation of special units of study, displays of artifacts, multicultural fairs, and shaded faces in textbooks. Also, people's points of view regarding how they see reality created problems in the sense that, while people of color saw a need for greater multicultural efforts in the schools, whites mostly did not. This disagreement caused a continual barrier to communication and sound problem solving. The dominance of whites in the community power structure limited decision making on issues relevant to racial equity and fostered continued isolation of white people from the issues and realities shared by people of color. To solve the communication dilemma, words that describe were substituted for words that label. Gaps in reality perceptions were narrowed through use of cultural artistic events and the use of incentives to encourage attendance. Finally, competent and informed people of color were used to head meetings and to act as liaisons in district staff discussions which helped to enrich the content and perspectives of these gatherings as well as to lessen the dominating influence of the white majority. (GLR)

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Supporting Diversity in Schools through
Family and Community Involvement

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LANGUAGE AND RACE:

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATING

A VISION

The first in a series of reflective issue papers by SDS participants.

November, 1991

Supporting Diversity in Schools (SDS) is a six-year program inaugurated in September 1989, in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The program seeks to address the educational inequities experienced by children as a result of their race or culture by building school environments that welcome, appreciate and effectively teach children of color.

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LANGUAGE AND RACE: BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATING A VISION

by Ruth Anne Olson, SDS Program Director

The purpose of SDS has always been clear to those who created it. Put simply, we want schools to be equally-fine places for children of all races. We want them to be places where adults and children are as excited and supportive of a classmate's experience of a pow-wow as they are of childish pleasures over a birthday party; where parents are confident that their fears of racial barriers will receive unhesitating respect and action; and where every child is reflected in the literature being read, the history being examined, and the customs being recognized.

A recent national newscast described Hispanic students in New York as feeling like guests in their own schools. People of color, and others who have been privileged to listen carefully to their experiences, know what that means. We know those feelings are as true in Saint Paul, Minnesota, as they are in New York City. The goal of SDS is to change that.

Throughout the first two years of the program, we have found great difficulties in communicating that purpose. Three overlapping dimensions appear to contribute to this problem: the broad range of meanings given to words such as multicultural curriculum and instruction, the differences in the importance and intensity of our mission as experienced by white people and by people of color, and the structural barriers to adequate communication within largely-white power realities. This brief issue-paper will examine each of these.

WORDS AS BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

From the beginning, the creators of SDS struggled with choosing the words that best describe our purposes. We talked of "multicultural curriculum and instruction," of breaking down the "isolation of schools and communities of color from one another," and of "family involvement." Those words and phrases brought powerful images to our minds; we quickly learned that they brought equally powerful but quite-different images to the minds of others.

When people in SDS talk of multicultural curriculum and instruction we mean full and complete integration of all races and cultures into the curricular content, instructional process, and all interactions related to schools. We learned the hard way that many people hear the words to mean something quite different — special units of study, display of artifacts, multicultural fairs, and shaded faces in textbooks.

The English say that America and Great Britain are countries separated by their common language. Similarly, words were creating a mischief of misunderstanding in SDS. In fact, the program nearly stalled-out over the confusion and conflict that resulted from its unclear language.

TWO VIEWS OF THE WORLD

SDS was born of the hopes, dreams and anger of people of color in St. Paul. It's true that many white people, myself included, have tagged onto those realities. But I'm confident that I can touch only the surface of the urgency and agony felt by people who have "lived" the issues and who become steeped in the hope for life to be different for their own children.

Many people involved in these issues are white. We choose to get involved because its the right thing to do, we're stimulated by the personal growth that results, and it's an opportunity to bring together many varied strands of the values that underlie our lives.

But the key in that paragraph is the word "choose." Involvement is my choice. For most of my colleagues and many of my friends involvement is no choice at all. It is synonymous with living. I'm convinced that it is nearly impossible to fully bridge the gap between those two realities, that it is not possible to fully communicate the mission of SDS across large numbers of people when the experiences that individuals bring to reality are so widely disparate.

The differences are visible in a thousand ways in SDS. One can hear it in the varying intensities with which people talk of what needs to be done. One can feel it in the great differences in how two people interpret the realities of day-to-day interactions. And one can see it in the differing body language of people listening to strong presentations about education, race and prejudice.

"Two worlds" are even reflected objectively in the split responses written on the evaluation forms about many of the speakers we sponsor and the performances we host. The vast majority of our participants of color give a thumbs up and, "Right on"; large numbers of our white participants either ho-hum with, "This was not new," or protest, "We addressed those issues long ago."

The reality of these two worlds serves as a continuous barrier to communication and sound problem solving. Trying to step from one world to the other, even for a glimpse of the differences that exist, is risky business. Honest communication falls victim to the protections that people create for themselves.

THE DOMINANCE OF WHITE POWER

Because of those "two worlds," discussions on virtually any topic vary enormously depending on the racial/cultural balance of those involved. All white, predominantly white, predominantly of-color and (I'm told) all of-color groups yield tremendous variations — in tone, content and conclusion.

SDS is about racial/cultural diversity, and early-on I made a promise to myself that I would never arrange any "official" discussion about the program that would involve an all-white group of people. In fact, I pledged, people of color would be in the *majority* in all such discussions.

I knew, of course, that the power-structures within our community are predominantly white. Even so I assumed that accomplishment of my first promise to myself would be easy. The second, I reluctantly acknowledged, would be a bit harder.

I quickly discovered that I had underestimated the intensity of the problem. Consider: There are times when it is important to meet with the foundation funders of SDS. All are headed by white people. Some program issues call for frank discussions with the principals of all the schools in SDS partnerships. All are white. Evaluation issues occasionally create the need to meet with the evaluation staff of the school district. All white. And often, of course, I need to meet with people above me in the hierarchy of The Saint Paul Foundation which created and administers SDS. All white. Even the heads of many of the participating community agencies that serve communities of color are white.

What this means, of course, is that the people who head organizations and make daily decisions relevant to the achievement of racial equity have, in fact, little opportunity to hear the realities of their fellow citizens of color. Even more rarely do they have the opportunity to hear them in settings in which the people of color feel the confidence of expression possible only when the majority of those present have shared the daily reality of discrimination. The isolation of white people from these issues inevitably leads to our inability to learn, to understand, and to respond effectively.

GETTING UNSTUCK

The problem for SDS has been to figure out how to get unstuck from these issues of communication and commitment. We've worked hard at it, we've made some progress, and we recognize that much more effort is yet to come. I believe that our attempts at solutions are worth sharing.

To address the issue of a common language, we've gone through a long and intense process to fully comprehend what we're about. A great diversity of people has been part of that process, and we've tried to shy away from words that label and to focus, instead, on those that describe.

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We're also trying several strategies to bridge the gap created by the fact that some people live and others only observe the issues of racial discrimination. We believe, for example, that the arts and humanities play a major role in the process of bridging the gap. To that end, we have a multicultural book group in which teachers and community people together discuss *Yellow Raft in Blue Water, Joy Luck Club, Their Eyes Were Watching God* and other works that bring forward human experience in all its richness. We provide incentives and encourage people to attend artistic events within the community — productions by an African American theater company, an Indian pow-wow, classical Cambodian dance, and exhibits of Latino visual arts. All of these, we believe, are important vehicles toward making realities of race come alive for white people.

We also try to end white people's isolation from their colleagues of color. We try to assure that the predominance of people in the formal and informal interactions organized by SDS are of color; and we try to reinforce the resulting confidence for people by arranging that such discussions be led by persons of color.

Sometimes these strategies require that we redefine the makeup of meetings to include a broader range of roles, including people who carry little formal power. Our funders, for example, now meet with the larger program staff which is predominately of color, and discussions with the district's evaluation staff now include evaluation liaisons, primarily of color, from our school-community partnerships.

While each of these efforts is slow in the making and may even feel a bit cumbersome at first, the effects are immediate and powerful, and the incentives to stick with them are strong indeed. The people of color who join these discussions are competent and informed. The resulting discussions are infinitely richer in content, perspective and conclusion.

And finally, all of these efforts empower of us all. They free people of color to express the strengths of their feelings and experiences, and they invite white people to listen hard.

CONCLUSION

When SDS was inaugurated in 1989, I anticipated few if any of the problems that I've described. But I suspect that they are not unique as people in government agencies, school districts, private industry and a wide variety of other organizations in our city and throughout the country work to enhance the cultural richness of our communities.

The effort required to move forward is enormous; the rewards are profound. Our attempts at reaching solutions in SDS are only small steps toward the fundamental goals of equity and involvement. I hope this brief issue-paper will lend confirmation and support to others who share our goals. ♦

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